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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 002042

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL MO WI AG

SUBJECT: DELIVERY OF PRESIDENT'S LETTER ON WESTERN SAHARA/ALGERIAN-MOROCCAN RELATIONS

REF: WHITE HOUSE 301549Z

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RICHARD W. ERDMAN; REASON 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Responding to delivery of the President's letter, Algerian Presidential Adviser Rahal agreed with the President's message and the desirability of improved Algerian-Moroccan relations but did not demonstrate any flexibility or imagination as to how Algeria might contribute to such a process. Covering familiar ground, he said Algeria was not a party to the Western Sahara dispute, had no territorial claims in the Western Sahara, and did not want differences over this issue to prevent bilateral cooperation.

Interestingly, he said point blank that "we don't have a problem with the Western Sahara becoming part of Morocco," but that doing this against the wishes of the local population would be highly destabilizing. In this regard, Morocco's rejection of the Baker Plan, he claimed, missed an opportunity to achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome via referendum voting procedures favorable to Morocco. This was radicalizing Sahrawi youth, something Algeria did not want to see. Throughout the conversation, Ambassador expressed the President's hope that both sides would seize the opportunity created by the prisoner release to work for improved relations and better communication. (End Summary)

PRESIDENT'S LETTER DELIVERED

12. (C) Due to the absence abroad (in Paris) of outgoing Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir, Ambassador called on Presidential Diplomatic Adviser Rahal October 2 to deliver the President's message of September 30 (reftel) to President Bouteflika urging improved Algerian-Moroccan relations. Ambassador read through the text, leaving the English text as well as an unofficial Embassy French translation.

ALGERIA WANTS IMPROVED RELATIONS BUT ...

13. (C) Rahal thanked Ambassador for the letter, commenting that he fully agreed with the President's message. Algeria wanted improved relations with Morocco, he insisted, and to this end President Bouteflika had sought to improve bilateral communication with Morocco by sending Belkheir to Rabat as Ambassador. Algeria did not want differences over the Western Sahara to interfere with expanded trade and cooperation with Morocco, which was in both sides' interest. Algeria was disappointed that Morocco continued to act as if Algeria were a party to the dispute. This complicated efforts to keep the Western Sahara and bilateral issues separate. He noted that the differences in age, personality, and experience between Bouteflika and Mohammed VI were another complicating factor, noting that the King's sudden turnabout in canceling PM Ouyahia's visit to Rabat last June, only 45 minutes after the Algerians had been informed the King would host Ouyahia, had given great offense.

BAKER PLAN REJECTION A MISSED OPPORTUNITY
THAT IS NOW RADICALIZING SAHRAWI YOUTH

14. (C) Covering familiar ground on the Western Sahara issue, Rahal said that Algeria had no territorial claims there, would not sacrifice any Algerian lives over this issue, and wanted to see a settlement that respected UN resolutions and the principle of self-determination. Reiterating Algeria's support for the Baker Plan, Rahal expressed concern that Morocco, by rejecting the plan and unilaterally seeking to assert sovereignty, had missed a real opportunity. Worse, "it was pushing young Sahrawis toward more radical positions, which Algeria did not want to see happen." Morocco's rejection of Baker was also increasing demands among Sahrawi youth for an "independence" outcome, the opposite of what Morocco wanted.

"WE DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH
THE WESTERN SAHARA BECOMING PART OF MOROCCO" BUT...

15. (C) In this regard, Rahal said, "We don't have a problem with the Western Sahara becoming part of Morocco. But it can't happen against the wishes of the local population." That would be a recipe for permanent instability and tension. The Baker Plan, he argued, had offered a way forward because it would have allowed all Moroccans present in the territories to vote in a self-determination referendum, not just the Sahrawis. With roughly equal numbers of Moroccans and Sahrawis, Morocco, if it had properly managed the situation and demonstrated that autonomy would work, could have achieved the outcome it wanted. Algeria had shown good will in accepting this highly unusual kind of voting process, he maintained. He underscored that not a single other government in the world has recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara and that Algeria would never accept a fait accompli on this matter. This question could only be resolved on the basis of self-determination.

NEED FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS, GREATER
SENSITIVITY, AND BETTER COMMUNICATION

16. (C) Ambassador throughout the conversation expressed the President's hope that both sides would seize the opportunity created by the prisoner release to work for improved relations and better communication. In this regard, he noted that both sides seemed to be accusing the other of walking back on an understanding to separate bilateral and Western Sahara issues, dealing with the later in a UN framework. This underscored the need for better communication, as did the unfortunate misunderstandings that arose when Morocco announced the lifting of the visa requirement without advance notice. Ambassador agreed that Morocco could have been more sensitive in its handling of this issue. By the same token, Algeria had made a serious error in not being more sensitive and not responding more generously to the King's gesture in attending the Arab League Summit in Algiers in March. "Why do we need to reward someone for attending an Arab League Summit?", Rahal responded not very sympathetically.

COOL REACTION TO FM BENAISSA'S
INVITATION TO FM BEJAOUI

17. (C) Again stressing both sides' interest in getting bilateral relations back on track via resumption of a high level dialogue, Ambassador hoped Algeria would respond positively to the invitation FM Benaissa recently extended to FM Bedjaoui. Rahal, who seemed not well informed about the invitation, said his own personal view was that since the Moroccans had canceled the Prime Minister's visit, to get things restarted they should issue the invitation at the prime ministerial level. (Comment: MFA Secretary General, in an October 3 conversation (septel), took a completely different tack, dismissively arguing that the issue was not the level of the interlocutors but what they would say.) Ambassador closed the conversation reiterating the President's hope that Algeria would work in a positive and constructive spirit for improved bilateral relations with Morocco.

ERDMAN